



Photos by MIKE SALSURY/The Columbian

Vancouver Community AME Zion Church members gather on Sunday afternoon for the annual Black History Month program. Clark College President R. Wayne Branch was one of two featured speakers. The event's theme was "Increasing Our Passion for Excellence in Education."

Branch: Still a long way to go

Clark College head calls for greater participation to improve education

By **JOSE PAUL CORONA**
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Educating children is everyone's responsibility.

That was the theme Clark College President R. Wayne Branch presented at Vancouver Community AME Zion Church on Sunday.

Branch, who spoke as part of the local celebration of Black History Month, addressed those gathered at the church and encouraged them to take a role in improving the quality of education in the United States.

"Public education is suffering, and it will continue to suffer if we don't do something," he said to nearly 100 attendees.

Branch reminded those in attendance that many things have changed, but others have stayed the same.

"It used to be illegal for black folks to learn in America," he said. Teachers caught teaching black children would be "run out of town," he added.

Many have fought for better access to education, and while strides have been made, there is still a long way to go, Branch said.

Kids can't just be "turned over to public education" and be expected to learn all of life's lessons, he said. Parents need to help their children after school every day. If they don't do it, no one else will, he added.

Simply "getting in the door is no longer what it's cracked up to be."

Kids need constant encouragement, assistance and praise, Branch said. "The route to higher education



Algje Gatewood, left, president of Portland Community College's Cascade Campus, and Clark College's Wayne Branch, right, were presented with Vancouver Community AME Zion Church's Pioneer of Freedom Award.

has always been fraught with peril," he said.

Federal budget cuts to education programs, mandatory testing and other personal factors can prevent students from achieving a higher education, Branch said. "The road to academic success is not the same for all people."

There still is inequitable funding from one school to another, so parents have to remain vigilant, he said.

Branch's comments elicited praise and applause.

Besides assistance from adults, students need the tools to succeed, he said. Kids who have an iPod have to have a computer. But along with a computer, children need to have books, and if they don't have

access to books, they need a library card. "It's free," he said to applause.

Other parts of the world — Branch cited China and India as examples — are churning out more college graduates with engineering Ph.D.s than the United States is, he said.

But while obtaining a high-quality education is difficult and expensive, it's not impossible, he said.

Persistence is important. The fable of the tortoise and the hare is not just a story, he said, it's meant to teach us something.

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